[Elizabeth E. Miller]

1

Life Histories Vermont 1938-9

FORM A

Vermont

Mrs. Rebecca M. Halley

West Newbury, Vermont

Nov. 18, 1938

Folklore

1. Nov. 4, 16, 1938.

2. Miller Bros., Mountain and Lake View Farm, West Newbury, Vt., South Ryegate, R. F. D., Vt.

3. Mrs. Elizabeth E. Miller.

6. It is a big square white house built in 1927 after the old farm house burned down. The long ell with two garage stalls, woodshed and storeroom runs back towards the big red barn. The house faces the beautiful view of Hall's Lake, the Connecticut River valley and the White Mountains beyond.

The kitchen is large and modern in equipment and working space. The dining room is a bit smaller than the kitchen and practically filled with the big dining table, a cabinet-radio and a secretary (a combination bookcase and desk). The house is substantial, plain, built

for utility rather than grace. It has the look of the race of substantial people who inhabit it. There is a certain satisfaction in visiting there for the folks and the house are so consistent with each other. It is not always that a farm family has a chance to build a home which expresses their own characteristics so well. Four-square, high beamed, solid, it has plain useful furnishings, 2 it gives off a certain set, purposeful, stubbornness. “I am here,” it seems to say. “You may take me or leave me. I have work to do. I shall do it. Try and move me.” 1 Vermont 1938-9

FORM B

Vermont

Mrs. Rebecca M. Halley

West Newbury, Vermont

Nov. 18, 1938

Folklore

1. Scotch - Yankee.

2. South Ryegate, Aug. 28, 1848. (Age 90, please note).

3. Four boys: Clarence, John, James and George; and one daughter who died in infancy. James Miller, her husband, died Feb, 13, 1890.

4. South Ryegate 1848-1872, Ryegate 1872-1890, Newbury 1890 —.

5. Graded school on Jefferson Hill.

9. Grammy Miller is not very tall, but she is heavy. Her body is square and solid. Her hair is only gray and sweeps up to a loose knot on top of her head. She wears a gingham dress,

an apron, and when she stops to sit down she draws a square of shawl over her broad shoulders. Her face is wide and strong, her eyes are intent and interested. She peers at one in concentration, for her sight is clouded by cataracts which, she says, will make her blind, if (she adds quaintly) she lives long enough. Vigorous hairs spring out an her chin and round her mouth. Her wrinkles are deep with hard, intense living. Laugh wrinkles, anger wrinkles, scorn wrinkles, worry wrinkles. Her face is a map of her life. She has a deep, booming, easy laugh. She likes strong talk, strong living, strong people. 2 There is no weakness in her and she can not abide it in others. She carries and flaunt's a deep and consuming pride in her own, both sons and grandchildren. They were afraid of her in the days when she was the patriarch of the family. New ways and customs have weakened her power. She is still vitally interested in all the world is doing and would rather discuss present events and trends than those of the past. Her creed has been and is, “work hard, work well, save something out of everything you earn.” She has been a hard, merciless woman, but time and sorrow have mellowed her to rich understanding woven through with a gleaming vein of humor. Her feet have given out and she finds it hard to get around. “I will not give up,” she says, “for if I should take to my bed, I would never be out of it. I would rather wear out than rust out. They say a person is as young as their feet.” She shakes with laughter. “Well, I must be getting on, then.”

1

Vermont 1938-9

FORM C

Vermont

Mrs. Rebecca M. Halley

West Newbury, Vermont

Nov. 18, 1938

Library of Congress

Folklore - Mrs. Elizabeth E. Miller (Grammy Miller).

“I was the oldest of six children. Mother was never very well and when I was about ten she was taken real sick and had to be abed most of the time. We had help sometimes, but as soon as I could, I took over and did the work. I learned to wash by scrubbing at the wash tub while the woman who helped was at the table with the family. I've always said I was born to work because I came at one o'clock of a Monday morning ready for the wash tubs. For eighty years, ever since I was ten, I have been at it steady. The only machine I had in those days was the 'machine' my mother gave me,” and she raised her two arms.

“Mother would sit in the wheel chair when she was better and able to be up round and give me advice while I worked. When I scrubbed the floor, she would say, 'Now, Lizzie, scrub it hard and then wipe it good and dry with clean water.' I learned to do things well and it has stayed with me all my life.

“I didn't have no education, but I had the chance of one,” she said wistfully. “I might have been a woman of letters and used my head instead of my hands, but,” she continued earnestly, 2 “I had to do what was before me to do. My uncle lived down the road on the next farm and they were real well off. One day when I was calling there, I remember just as plain, I sat in the buggy we had driven over. I sat there and uncle said to me that he would pay for my schooling if I would come and live with them. I looked at him and said, 'Uncle, I can't. I've got to stay with Mother. She needs me.' That was all that was ever said about it.

“When I went out to work no one ever found fault with what I did. I helped the minister's folks clean house one spring and we did up the curtains. They said, with pardonable pride, 'they had never been done better. What did I know about doing up curtains? We had never had anything like them at home. It was my Mother's training. If you learn to do small things well, you can do all things well.'

“My father's farm was just off the road to Jefferson Hill, on the branch that goes to Limekiln. We used to go to church in South Ryegate three miles away. We would take our shoes and stockings in our hands and walk to church barefoot. Then we went into the house next door to the church and put them on and again to take them off after church. We had to save shoe-leather and bare feet don't wear out. With six children and an invalid to take care of, my father had to scratch some. I took mother's eggs to the store in South Ryegate in a pail every week, and tugged back a load of groceries. Father had just the one horse and he had to be saved for farm work. He couldn't go gallivantin' unless it was necessary.

3

“I never went much to dances. Mother didn't hold with it for girls. My brother George went. Mother didn't seem to feel the same about the boys. He didn't want to take his older sister, he had some other girl on the string and I had to stay at home unless someone chanced to come for me. I went sometimes though, Brother George could kick it up, he never went to dancing school either. My sakes, he was a clipper at it. All the girls liked to dance with George. One time I was at a dance and someone asked George, 'Couldn't I dance?' and he said, 'Her dance? Why, she couldn't dance no more'n a cow.' Quite like the thing from a brother wasn't it,” and she chuckled, her thoughts deep in the past.

“I did like to go to singing school. They were held about twice a month down in the Town House. I could sing out, too, in those days and all the girls would come and sit round me because I could hold them to it. I had a lot o' push then. It was two miles and a half to the Town House from our farm and many a night I walked there and back. I was young and strong and I never had time to be sick.

“Then later they held church meetings in the Town House. Every other Sunday they had a Mithodist and then a Congregationalist preacher. The Town House would be filled full to overflowing with people. Arch McAllister, that was husband to my sister, was superintendent and he kept things right up. The meetings were held in the afternoons so

as the parson could come after the services in the other churches. Then later folks began to fall off coming and finally they had to give it 4 up.

“Father had a loom, it was grandmother's. It was broken and I was always at him to get it fixed, but he never did. I felt bad about that for I wanted to learn to weave. I would spin for I learned to do that. We would take the sheep's wool to the mill and have it carded into rolls. Then I spun it. We had the spinning wheel here until the old house burned down in 1926. So many things went then that meant so much to me. But I never let myself think about it. There's no use and it was hard enough for the boys without my complaining. About the spinning - I spun the warp, but mother thought she had better spin the filling. Bert Tuttle's grandmother was to weave the cloth and she came to the house to see the spinning. She looked at the warp and said to mother. 'My sakes, you better let this girl spin the filling, too. She has done a nice piece of work here.' Later she told mother she couldn't have had nicer, stronger yarn to weave with. She made up the cloth for a frock for father. It was a long frock that came clear to his knees made from wool of our own sheep.

“Mother and I knit all the long stockings for the women and girls and the footins and mittens from yarn I had spun. Land sakes, the footins, double mittens and single mittens I have knit. After I was married and the children were growing up, I was never without a pair of needles in my hands. In the fall I had somebody came in to help while I did up the fall spinning.

“Land sakes, don't you know how they spin? With my right hand or with a stick, some women used a stick, but I most usually 5 used my hand, I would keep the wheel going and with my left I pulled the yarn and twisted it to the spindle.” She demonstrated with both bands, the motions. “Then I had a swift to wind the yarn on. It was a whirly thing that let the yarn free to wind into a ball.

“Land sakes, one time I had company and they wanted to know how many skeins I had spun that day. I sent little Clarence in to get all the skeins. He was just a small youngone

then and he was loaded with the ten skeins. Granny Miller lived with us then and she thought Clarence was the only child ever was. She would say, 'Aye, yon bairn war unca guide wee 'un.' She would call him 'Ma bonnie prince, ma wee king,' and was in a fair way to spoil him.

“I always colored my own yarns and I would make the boys' stockings striped grey and some other pretty color like blue to go with it. The legs were knit with a row of color and the feet plain. When I went out to a sociable or a farmers' meeting in the evening, I always took my knitting. We had a spanking pair then and when we were out in the carryall I knit up hill and down. My knitting went everywhere but to church.

“The only vacations I had in those days was when the children were born. We didn't lay abed as long after our confinements then as they do now. I had a wonderful doctor. Old Dr. Darling from South Ryegate. Folks used to say he was a crabbed old thing, but I never had anything but kindness from him. I've heard my father tell about the time he went for the doctor. There was one of the hired help had a bone felon on 6 his finger. They are awfully painful and it got so bad I s'pose he couldn't stand it. So father took off after Dr. Darling in the middle of the night. The doctor had gone to bed, but father said he got up and sat there in a chair in his shirt tail and swore he wouldn't go out that night. His wife lit the lamp and he roared at her to put it out. She did and went back to bed. She was used to his ways and she left him to grumble. Father told him after a while, 'Well, Doctor, if you are not coming, I shall have to go get someone else.' The doctor jumped up and shouted, 'Get to the barn, man, and hitch up the horse. Who said I wasn't coming?' He was a fine man for all of that and he lived long enough to see me through all my boys and the little girl that died when she was only a few months old.

“When the boys were small, I made the under clothes, pants and overalls for my husband. There was no chance then to buy them. We had to make them. I would lay a pair of pants down on the floor and cut round them. Then sew them up and he wore them. I had one

nice dress for best and made all my other things. I bought twelve and a half yards of calico and made a dress out of it myself. Things changed for the boys and I quit spinning.

“We never used to can things the way we do now. We salted pork down, froze the beef and packed it in oats, and had the root crops in the cellar.

“One fall we had a five hundred and fifty pound dressed hog hanging in the yard. The men went off to Wells River to take up another hog they had dressed at the same time and left it 7 hanging there and the caldron kettle half full of water. They aimed to get back and take the hog down cellar before it froze. It would never do to let pork that was going to be salted freeze. I was all alone with the children and I waited until almost twelve. My husband didn't come and so I took a lantern and a saw and a knife and went out to fetch in that hog. I emptied out the water from the caldron kettle where they het it for the scalding tub, so it wouldn't freeze and burst. Then I cut up that hog and loaded it piecemeal onto the sled. The worst part was getting it through the front door, but I managed. I had it all done before my husband got home. He asked who had brought the hog in. I said, 'I did.' He asked who helped and I said, 'Alone.' I wasn't wasting many words on him. He was struck dumb. Later I found out the horse had lamed and had to walk all the way from Wells River. I made up my mind then and there that another hog could freeze for all of me. My husband would have gone for Brother John to help bring it in, but I did it alone.

“Ah, well. Those were good times, but they are gone now. Life is nothing but changes.”